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PLAY FOR THE PLANET

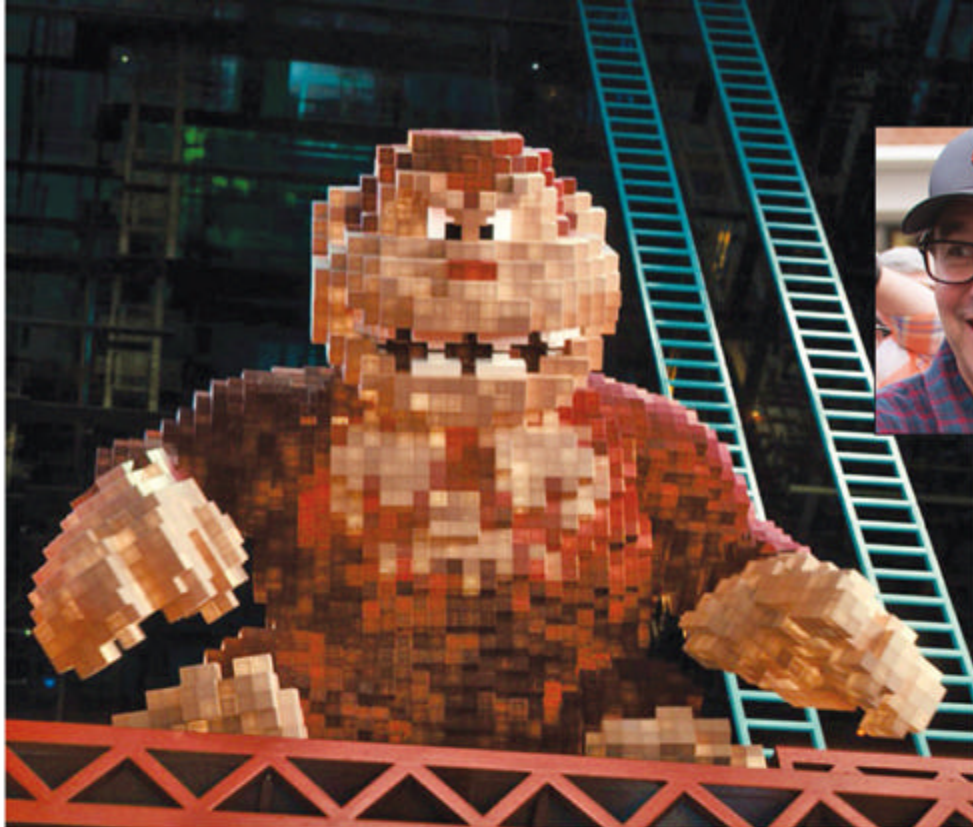
PIXELS

#PixelsMovie



COLUMBIA
PICTURES

a Sony Company



CHRIS COLUMBUS

GEORGE KRYCHAK © CTMG, INC.

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PIXEL

Playing videogames is easy; translating them into the world of live-action features is hard. That's the life lesson that Chris Columbus learned during the making of *Pixels*, which pits a squad of ex-arcade coin jockeys led by Adam Sandler against some of the seminal characters of their youth, among them Pac-Man, Donkey Kong and those pesky Space Invaders. "I love the movie, but I have to say that next to the first *Harry Potter*, it was the most difficult film I've had to make," a tired but chipper Columbus tells *Film Journal International*. "It doesn't seem that way when you're watching the movie, but we had to get to a point where we could design visual effects that the audience hadn't seen before. I wanted to create something that would have them saying, 'Holy s—t, what is that?'"

The director's two-year journey on *Pix-*

els, which arrives in theatres on July 24 from Sony, started with a one-on-one meeting with Sandler during which the two hit it off so well so that the actor passed along the script. He immediately responded to the high-concept hook of aliens replicating giant-sized versions of vintage videogame characters to attack the Earth. With the military stymied, mankind's fate lies in the hands of Sam Brenner (Sandler) and his fellow '80s videogame heroes turned present-day zeroes, including Peter Dinklage as Sandler's one-time rival and Josh Gad as another socially challenged gamer. (Meanwhile, Sandler's friend and frequent collaborator Kevin James plays—believe it or not—the President of the United States, who hatches this cracked plan to save the world.) *FJI* spoke with Columbus about his own videogame history, creating a different kind of role for Sandler, and what *Pixels* has in common with *The Goonies*.

Film Journal International: What videogames defined your youth? Were you part of the Pong generation or the Pac-Man generation?

Chris Columbus: I used to play the tabletop versions of *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* when I went out to bars [in the '80s.] I was a little too old to go to arcades; I would have been one of those 22-year-old guys hanging out at the arcade, which isn't a good thing. [laughs] And arcades had a short lifespan, really—they opened in '81 or '82 and then closed a few years later when people were able to play games at homes on their consoles. So games like *Centipede*, *Breakout* and *Q*bert* sort of passed me by. It was great research to have to do. Instead of 200-year-old history books, I got to play arcade games every day! My favorite is still *Pac-Man*. I love, love that game.

FJI: What process did you have to go

ALIENS MISINTERPRET CLASSIC ARCADE GAMES AS A DECLARATION OF WAR, THEN ATTACK EARTH WITH... PAC-MAN AND DONKEY KONG

by Ethan Alter

THIS!

through to secure the rights to use Pac-Man and the other arcade characters in the film?

CC: Donkey Kong wasn't part of the first draft of the script I received. They couldn't get the rights to him, so there was a completely different set-piece. Pac-Man and *Centipede* were already integrated into the script, which meant they had the rights. We met with each game company and explained to them what we wanted to do. They take their characters very seriously, and wanted to make sure we'd treat them with respect. There were weekly video conference calls with Japan, particularly with Nintendo when we were figuring out how to get Donkey Kong into the movie. It was a great day when they finally gave us permission.

JOSH GAD FLEES FROM PAC-MAN.
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FJI: How did you translate the characters from videogame screens to the big screen?

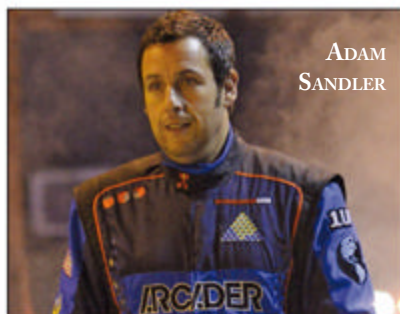
CC: Most of the visual effects we see in summertime [blockbusters] are based on some sort of reality, but our visual effects are literally based on videogames, so we had to conceive of something that could exist in our world, but had its origins in those games. For example, because these characters are based on arcade games, that means they're lit from within. How does that translate into a 3D character? We tried to create something where the pixels on the bodies of these characters are constantly moving. And when you're designing characters like Donkey Kong and Pac-Man, they're lovable characters to a gigantic part of the population, but you don't want them to be silly or goofy, because they have to really represent a threat to the planet. So we realized very quickly that you're walking a fine line.

FJI: Adam Sandler generally has two distinct modes—he makes PG-rated comedies for families and PG-13 or R-rated comedies for teenagers and adults. Were there back-and-forth discussions about where this one would fall?

CC: One of the things that appealed to me was making a movie like the ones I made when I started out as a writer in the '80s. I wrote *Gremlins* and *The Goonies* and *Young Sherlock Holmes*, those Amblin films. Whatever that genre of movie was, it fell out of existence in the late '80s. But you go to meetings these days and people say, "We want to make Amblin movies like *The Goonies*." And I realized that I was there, I wrote those movies, it's in my DNA. I know how to make one of those movies, I just haven't made one since 1985! So I set out to do a movie that had the spirit of those Amblin movies, which were PG but very edgy. We ended up getting a PG-13 on *Pixels* and I think the movie deserves that rating. But there are a lot of eight-year-olds who will want to see it as well.

FJI: I showed *The Goonies* to my kids recently and I had forgotten how much the characters curse in that movie. I spent the first ten minutes thinking I'd made a horrible mistake, but relaxed when I saw what a great time they were having watching it.

CC: [laughs] It's interesting how we're almost more sensitive to language today than we were back in the '80s. I think *Pixels* walks a fine line. I don't think kids are going to be thinking, "This is a little too edgy for me." What I'm finding is that kids see the commercials on TV and can't wait to go. Seeing these characters, something goes off in their brains. Maybe it's not nostalgia



ADAM SANDLER

like it is for you and me, but it's more like, "Oh my gosh, this looks really cool!"

FJI: What sort of discussions did you have with Adam about his character?

CC: We always knew that this had to feel different than some of the films he'd done in the past. I told Adam, "This is a different kind of role for you. We have to believe your character is a real person so that when we get to the action, there's a real investment from the audience in him." And he has an arc in the movie; he's a guy who grew up in a world where he wasn't that great at sports or academics, but when the arcade came to town, he realized he had a talent for playing these games. He thought it was his future, but then he grew up not having much of a future. He's repairing televisions when we meet him. So the movie is about giving him and his friends a sense of purpose. I wanted to use everyone's strengths as actors as opposed to doing an over-the-top comedy. Like Kevin James as the President is playing a slightly more serious role. He's not giving a broad comedic performance in this movie and no one else is that broad either. They're grounded, and that was fun for me to play with.

FJI: Which action sequence was the most fun to design and execute?

CC: The word "fun" in relating to the making of this film is probably not the right word. [laughs] It was backbreaking and grueling and the set-pieces had to be meticulously planned. When I walked onto the Pac-Man set, I knew exactly what we were doing. It involved complicated interactive lighting; we had this little yellow golf cart, which could go up to 50 MPH and we surrounded it with gigantic yellow LEDs. So if Josh Gad is seen being chased down the street by Pac-Man in the movie, on set he was actually being chased by a golf cart that lit him from behind. Each day was pretty intense, because the final product had to be great. There was no room for failure, because we knew we were coming out in one of the most competitive summers ever.

FJI: As the director of the first two Harry

Potter films, you helped launch one of the most successful movie franchises ever. Did you go into *Pixels* thinking of its long-term possibilities?

CC: When we were doing the Amblin movies that weren't *Indiana Jones*, we only thought about them as one movie. We never went into *Goonies* thinking we were going to make ten of them and I didn't do that for this one either. What tends to happen is that if a movie is successful, they will make a sequel, but it's too early to say what it would be in this case. Maybe you could bring Donkey Kong or Pac-Man back, but then you're just retelling the first movie. And the videogames that came later in the '90s and '00s have probably been purchased by other studios for stand-alone movies. I don't think we'll ever be in this fortuitous place where we'll be able to make this movie with all these characters.

FJI: Do you have another directorial project lined up post-*Pixels*?

CC: I sort of work in two worlds these days. Almost two years ago, I started an independent film company called Maiden Voyage Pictures, which helps first-time filmmakers find the financing for their first features. We're starting our fourth film, *Tallulah*, in New York City soon. Our first two films [2014's *Little Accidents* and 2015's *The Witch*] went to Sundance, and our third [*Mediterranea*] just premiered at Cannes. They're all movies that cost \$1 to \$2 million and it's just basically enabling these directors to find their vision. I'm really kind of obsessed with that right now. And I'm also trying to find the next film I could direct, which could be something gigantic or something in the Maiden Voyage category. I'm not really sure yet.

FJI: Since you were present in those seminal Amblin days, do you expect to see movies like *Gremlins* or *The Goonies* come around again? Would you want to be involved if so?

CC: It's inevitable. One that seems like a good idea is rebooting *Gremlins*. Steven [Spielberg] and I have hired a writer who came up with a great story and really interesting way to do it. *The Goonies* has been talked about, although that's the most complicated. Every idea we've had doesn't feel like it could compare to the original. But we're trying; we've been talking to writers. And *Young Sherlock Holmes* has come up as well. There's a script for that. Thirty years down the road, visual effects are a thousand times better and there's still a way to preserve the charm of those handmade films with a bit of modern technology. I don't know that [directing a remake] is something I'd do, but as a producer it's fun to entertain the notion. ♣